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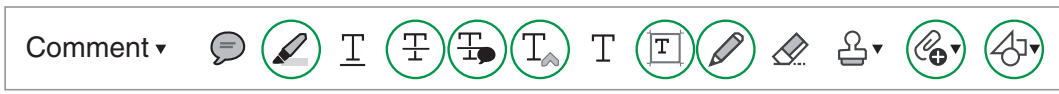

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Exploring the Theory of Metamorphosis: In Dialogue with Ulrich Beck

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Abstract
This interview with Ulrich Beck was undertaken in late August 2014. At this juncture Beck was preparing what was to be his final book, *The Metamorphosis of the World* (2016). The conversation is reflective of Beck's thinking around the theory of metamorphosis at that time and represents his views on the underlying dynamics of social transformation and the mobilizing power of global risks.

Keywords
Ulrich Beck, social transformation, theory of metamorphosis, world risk society

GM: Following on from our previous exchanges about the constitution of metamorphosis, I was trying to find a metaphor to describe the moment that you have identified between people *recognizing* that metamorphosis is a socially occurring phenomenon and the broader underlying sets of dynamics that characterize it as a distinct *process*. The metaphor that I was cogitating on was the double helix, which is a concept derived from the natural sciences. Essentially the double helix is configured by a pair of parallel strands running around a common axis. I just wondered if this functions as a metaphor in relation to your conception of metamorphosis? As I understand it, the double helix contains two linear strands that run in opposite directions, but interlace. So I wonder if metamorphosis constitutes that moment at which the two strands connect together. The point at which recognition and practice align and are seen to do so. Maybe the possibility of metamorphosis is the articulation that may arise in the moment at which the person who is inured to using the old techniques, methods, ways of seeing and so forth and has been traveling in one direction comes together and confronts the

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processes that are quite dramatic and have been running in the other direction.

UB: Oh, yes.

GM: Maybe the double helix can help explain that intersection point between the moments at which the researchers themselves become metamorphosed as they recognize transformations in underlying societal dynamics. As a consequence of this coming together they begin to recognize both the new world which is rolling out in front of their eyes and also the change within themselves. Does this align with the transformations that you are describing in the theory of metamorphosis?

UB: Yes. Those are really interesting observations. I myself have thought about utilizing metaphors to convey what is unique about metamorphosis. Mine are a little bit different from your metaphor. What I like about your idea is that, in actual fact, not only the researchers and technicians, but all of us – maybe most of society as well – is looking in one direction. And this direction is actually how we define the normal process of modernization, concentrating or focusing on the production and distribution of goods. In this way, lots of people create what are considered to be innovations that many people conceptualize and understand as progress. But such a perspective minimizes the issue of side effects. It is a common way of looking at modernity. Indeed, because of this and because modernization is successful, the process begins to travel in the opposite direction. Modernization is producing bads, all kind of bads. This is *verwandlung* (metamorphosis) in action. It is not actually the crisis, but rather the success story of modernization. The prime examples of this are nuclear weapons and nuclear energy, but there are many others as well. This is a conventional argument. The double helix metaphor allows for a different way of thinking. I really like this. But we don't currently recognize this way of thinking in the ways in which we conceive of progress and innovation. We have this dialectical relationship, whereby the process of travel in one direction is increasing. If we ignore it, matters gets even worse, but then something else happens. You can see this occurring in the public sphere to some extent. Public debates would be one example where you can discern this process, but you can also see it within science as well, where the focus of discussion has been changed by the observer or by the actor. We can talk about this and we can identify the change of focus which is now on bads, not goods. The distribution and production of bads introduces huge social conflicts. All kinds of debates come up and new forms of public movements emerge. Suddenly then people start to take notice of the transformations that are ongoing in the other direction. This is a discernible fact.

Then comes the next step in the relationship between goods and bads as I see it. Bads look like a threat. But this is only part of the story. In the next step of metamorphosis, one concentrates on bads and appreciates that they really are endangering humanity. Following on from this you can also see that there is a subsequent process going on: bads are producing common goods. At least to some extent and in a very specific way, in terms of normative expectations and normative imperatives. Again, this produces conflicts because of the tensions that arise in the course of changing normative horizons. So, you have to make a clear distinction between normative horizons and the institutional implementation of social reforms and policy changes. Actually, you could argue that dialogue in the social sciences about metamorphosis is taking place in a stadium of incomplete metamorphosis. Because there is no doubt that debates about the nature of social change *are* opening up, but what is going to be the next step? The direction of travel is not as yet determined. You could work through a series of different examples that might allow you to define the contours of these debates, but I do think that it is quite appealing to think about metamorphosis as a process which involves travel in two directions.

GM: Yes, the thing that intrigued me with the double helix metaphor is that the two directions of travel may at first appear unconnected. So, to employ the metaphor in relation to your project, you could argue that along one strand we have a series of processes that are materializing – propelled by risk, individualization, and cosmopolitization – which are, by and large, not being institutionally acknowledged. What's happening here is that both the institutional – and arguably the individual – ways of seeing do not enable us to grasp the dynamics of the processes that are shaping the world. Now, with metamorphosis, as with the double helix, what emerges is a crossing point between those two things, an articulation, if you will.

UB: Yes. Precisely.

GM: Following the molecular structure of the double helix, this constitutes a figure of eight, perhaps? So I suppose that my view – why the metaphor might be useful – is that I think that you are arguing that this linkage is a necessary stage. It is not just a coming together, but rather an intersection point at which people come to properly understand and appreciate the nature and the extent of change.

UB: That's a very good idea. This is precisely what I have in mind. If we can grasp and realize this, then there are new possibilities for action. Maybe sometimes these are very simple ones – which we haven't recognized so far – and sometimes they are more complicated. One important

challenge is to unravel this combination, to understand the power of this connection. If we focus on the potential of this synthesis, we can see that quite a few things are happening. First, we can identify that a metamorphosis is in train from a national to a cosmopolitan perspective. The second element is that, actually, the blinkeredness of the national perspective remains a threat, precisely because national institutions are at risk. But from a cosmopolitan or global perspective, something positive is actually happening. New normative horizons emerge which bring new social and political imperatives. The idea that we are in a post-modern world where everything is uncertain is quite wrong. On the contrary, we have very definite ideas about how the world has to be changed in order for us to survive.

One of the problems which I still don't quite understand – but which I am trying to work through myself – is the way in which problems and issues that seem so complicated to manage at the national level – to such an extent that nothing actually works anymore – can become quite simple to deal with when broached at the global level. One example of this is if you want to institutionalize a norm on the national level. This is very complicated. Especially a norm which has critical implications for institutions. But creating a normative consensus on the global level is a process that is already happening directly as a consequence of public debates and discussions about the impacts of risks and catastrophes on humanity. This is routinely occurring even though it is not written down or institutionalized in a specific form. At the global level – even if disbelievers refute it – some fundamental things are happening from one moment to the next and these arise out of anticipating and reflecting on catastrophes.

I came up with another metaphor this morning to describe this situation when discussing it with Elizabeth, my wife. We discussed the metaphor of a survivor of a shipwreck waking up on a desert island. In this situation the survivor meets people on the island and is confronted by another world. The shipwrecked person has a huge problem, because everything seems to be so different and they don't understand the people that live on the island. Everything is different: language and previous knowledge don't help at all in this unfamiliar context. They have no idea what to say or do. Then, as time passes, the survivor finds a language book and begins to learn the grammar of the island. They read with great hunger and begin to understand the environment and the people that live in it.

So, our metaphor is that we are actually shipwrecked in the world risk society. We have been catapulted into a different world of bads and we don't understand what's going on at all. All the fixed certainties and points of orientation have disappeared and we are getting desperate because we don't know where we are or how to move on. In this uncertain age, some people will undoubtedly say: 'okay, we just need to carry

on with progress as normal and everything will disappear'. But this isn't very convincing or reassuring. It doesn't make any sense. So, what I am trying to do with metamorphosis is to construct a book of grammar in order to find a language to render this world – the global risk society – understandable. Using the theoretical prism of metamorphosis I'm picking up on all kinds of topics like international politics, class and world cities and trying to understand them in the context of the processes I've talked about previously, which are global risk, cosmopolitization and individualization. This is the experimental space which I have tried to develop in order to engage with what might arise in the future and how we can make sense of it and research it in the present.

GM: I wanted to ask you about institutional change and the extent to which you think institutions have modernized in a reflexive manner. I'm thinking primarily about your concept of 'organized irresponsibility', which I thought was a fantastic term and just captured a set of practices that had previously been difficult to pin down. I was wondering whether you feel that Western institutions have become more reflexive and whether they have learnt to cope with uncertainty and manage risk in more sophisticated and progressive ways or whether you think that they are still tied to the old ways of thinking and acting.

UB: I think reflexivity in the sense of reflection is an important ingredient, but it wouldn't tell the whole story – at least this is my point of view now. Maybe we can see it as a door that we need to open to get into other debates. For instance, those about what I am calling the 'digital risk'. As I see it, this is a risk that is, in some ways, intangible – you cannot feel it, you cannot smell it, you cannot get physically hurt by it. Instead, it is related to sets of values, such as freedom. This gives it a different quality and power. If you want to look at what happens in digital modernity through the glasses of the normal modernization process, you can see that issues of freedom involve institutional actors, norms, laws in order to enforce standards which, in the best case, might be considered as appropriate, but which fail, totally fail. This paradox is what I call the failing of functional institutions.

For example, in Germany we had this big public debate and looked at our civil rights and freedoms and how they should be protected. So, we now have a legal policy which is ostensibly operational – let's imagine this is the case for a moment – but the system of law does not really relate to the new space of possibilities which is opened by global surveillance systems. So institutions are, to some extent, losing their functionality and, for them, the best way to not make this visible – part of the institutional reaction to the situation anyway – is to resort to the politics of invisibility. Most of the risks which I would say are naturally invisible – and by natural invisibility I don't just mean to the senses, not only the senses – I mean that this

invisibility is underpinned by very complex sets of issues. It is this very complexity which makes the issues invisible. And therefore in order to make those global risks visible, institutions have to do something. Radiation is one of those examples. You really have to do something. If you don't do anything you are just letting invisibility become the normal state of law and politics. Here the actual failure of institutions can be again changed into functionality – there is some functionality in the dysfunctionality. Because if nobody talks about it, you know, if we keep it invisible, then who is supposed to do something about it and how can we act? I think that this is pretty much the case and we could identify a similar process in relation to nuclear risks.

Let's look at institutions from a historical point of view and assume that they did previously have purpose and power. In failing to deal with or manage transformations and upheavals they have lost this historical purpose, both in terms of the issues that they were addressing and the resources of power required to defend their own existence. I think therefore institutions are definitely failing, but it's so difficult to see this, since to the naked eye institutions are there, they persist and endure. Thus, the problem is that institutions are failing but surviving in the modern world. They thus become an obstacle that prevents the political process of metamorphosis from happening.

GM: So would you say that institutions have become more *reflective* in terms of awareness of social problems and in terms of being more critical and future looking, but haven't become *reflexive*?

UB: Well, I would say that they have become reflexive, but in a way which enables them to continue with business as usual and not to change in structure and focus. This describes the situation at present, I think. Taking climate change as an example though, we can identify an important exception. This global environmental risk opens up space for a new kind and type of institution that has promising dynamics. With climate change the diagnosis of the experts is not comparable with the cases of radiation and nuclear power. It is not undermining their own position, but exactly the opposite. The more they enforce the climate change issue, the better standing they have and the more legitimacy they gain. This produces a new model of organizing public science and nation-states, that functions in a quasi-democratic way. It requires a synthesis of democratic and scientific modes of organization that occur on an international scale. So this type of combination is maybe a future model for the new metaphor you mentioned, the double helix. Yes, this would definitely be a good model for the double helix.

GM: Going back to your point about institutions failing but persisting, this brings to my mind the problem of counter-terrorism strategy. Here,

it's the same issue of the state producing an institutional performance of regulation rather than doing something that is actually likely to tackle the root causes of political violence.

UB: It's exactly the same problem. I wrote a little bit about this in the last chapter of *Cosmopolitan Vision*. They are creating wars on top of wars and this is making things worse.

GM: I just caught a little bit of the news late last night. Barack Obama was talking about Iraq and ISIS. It was actually quite relevant in relation to the point that you are making. He basically said here we have the United States military. We have the strongest military in the world. We can go into Iraq and we can wipe ISIS out. But only in that particular instant. The moment that troops are withdrawn, the problem continues. And that, for me, was quite refreshing to hear. That's exactly the likely outcome that wasn't properly considered in the original decision to invade Iraq.

UB: Indeed. This is one of the important points that comes up now in the Arab world. We are trying to use the old means, the old military means or whatever we have in order to try and fix this situation. But the moment we withdraw, everything is as it has been before. So, actually this is a perfect demonstration of institutions failing. Institutions fail and they don't have any answers because they cannot keep up with the pace of change. Historically speaking there have always been institutions that have had difficulty in coping – and this is actually linked to social change – but it's not the same situation that we are in now. Because there is a whole world of difference between the magnitude of problems we are confronted with at present and the institutional resources, discourses and concepts we have to understand and manage them.

In essence we are shipwrecked in our own world. But we are not suddenly shipwrecked. It's not a dramatic occurrence. This is what makes it so difficult. The old structures and old institutions remain, but at the same time they are all zombies that don't work anymore for the problems and issues which we are trying to grasp.

GM: So, we have to find a new way of working out how we can get over being marooned!

UB: Yes, and to do that we need to find some different ways of thinking and doing.

GM: If we can reverse from the future back to the past, I would be interested in your views about the various stories regarding the

emergence of risk historically and your reflections on the way in which risk developed and evolved distinctly across different cultures.

UB: Well, there are different opinions on this, but I would say that risk is a modern concept. Some people say there has always been risk, but I don't think this is the correct way of understanding matters. Risk runs contrary to religious interpretations of the world because it puts the decisions of humans at the centre and not gods, faith or nature. So, risk emerges as a way of comprehending and coping with the decisions and actions of people. Of course, all of this becomes more complex and develops through the centuries and it's very much connected to insurance and all kinds of mathematical forms of quantification and categorization. I actually once tried to construct a parallel history of the development of the European novel and the development of risk as a concept.

GM: Wow!

UB: There was a very interesting book about the art of novels written by Milan Kundera. I read this and I was quite fascinated by it. I quoted him in *World at Risk*. People didn't like this part of my book but I think that, regardless, it is intriguing, because you can see how the novel, or the development of the novel, is a way of telling the narrative of uncertainty, of adventure, of the paradoxes which come up. I found it fascinating to look at those parallels in detail. What caught my attention in Kundera's book was when he states '*Der mensch macht fehler*' – man fails – '*und gott lacht nicht, aber er lächelt*' – and God doesn't laugh, but he smiles. I think this is quite an interesting situation because it is the story of losing certainty: the story of losing yourself in the jungle of modernity, trying to find your way in this jungle, inventing institutional ways of making this possible, but thereby creating new kinds of problems for which you don't have any answers.

This is very much related to the history of rationality and rationalization, although it is a different story to risk. Maybe not at the beginning – at the beginning they overlap those two stories, risk is actually a form of rationality which gives us the capacity to cope with uncertainty and the problems we are creating. This is actually like Tony (Giddens) says. It is a way of colonizing the future. But the narrative of risk separates from the narrative of rationality and actually comes to oppose it. The more we try to rationalize the world through the paradigm of risk, the more we see that rationalization doesn't work. This is actually where the risk society comes in.

Risk society was not from the outset about trying to manage and cope with all kinds of risks. Yes, there has been some misinterpretation of the concept of risk society from the beginning and this persists today. This is why terms and the translation of terms is so important, because we are in

a position where we need to create and use new terms. But we are using old words, combining them somehow and then creating all kinds of misunderstandings. So this is a major methodological problem, to create terms which minimize the risk of understanding in a transnational, cosmopolitanized world. This is the way I would start to talk about historical differences. We are now in a situation where we are confronted by the anticipation of catastrophe. We cannot depend on past or present experience anymore. We live under conditions of uncertainty and not-knowing and in which we are threatened by catastrophe. This is the situation. So, what are we supposed to do?

There are two mistakes that we can make. One scenario would be that we act as if the unlimited possibilities of catastrophe that confront us are still 'normal' risks. In effect we redefine global risks as normal risks. But then lots of bad things could happen and institutions are then accused of not being responsible. In the other scenario, we overdramatize the situation and say: 'well, everything is getting very, very bad'. It's interesting to think about those two scenarios. In different situations people construct different scenarios, and there is a learning process in this for people. For different actors those scenarios look different. For example, politicians. If they underestimate the threat they can easily lose public trust and with it the next election. If they overestimate the risk, they can still present themselves as saviours of the population.

GM: Like Tony Blair, perhaps.

UB: Yes. So I think maybe for them it's easier to overestimate the risk, but there are different actors who act differently in different situations in responding to these risk dilemmas.

GM: Just to interject, did you follow Tony Blair's testimony to the Chilcot Inquiry about the reasons behind the invasion of Iraq?

UB: No.

GM: I found it quite gripping in terms of the language of risk he deployed. Blair actually borrowed your phraseology and talked about 'a new calculus of risk'. Of course, you talked about this way back in 1992 in *Ecological Politics in an Age of Risk*. So, Blair's testimony explicitly appropriates the language of catastrophe. He is basically arguing that after 9/11 the tools and techniques of the past become obsolete. You have to use new tools and techniques of risk assessment. They weren't, of course, new tools and techniques, and they proved to be counterproductive.

UB: Yes, this is true. Politicians are getting the point that the old language doesn't work anymore, but then they are then carrying on as per

normal and just repeating the same mistakes. In some instances, politicians are confusing the old and the new language and this too is problematic.

GM: I guess Donald Rumsfeld is the classic example. In actual fact what he said about the 'unknown unknowns' is quite perceptive, in my view. Nevertheless, he and the Bush administration still carried on regardless, implementing the old crude techniques and methods of military intervention.

UB: This would make for a very interesting case study.

GM: Indeed. Going back to the history – or histories – of risk, obviously there is the narrative of insurance which is important and also a narrative which is connected to rationality. Secularization is important too, certainly in terms of the gradual dissolution of the idea of a chain of being. When the world is understood in relation to a chain of being there is no need for risk because things will happen, because they have to happen, because he or she who is 'up there' decides. All of these aspects constitute elements of the story of risk, but the thing I would like to learn more about concerns temporality. To what extent do shifting notions and understandings of time and futurity in Giddens's terms change thinking about risk?

UB: Yes, this is part of another project I have been involved in with Daniel Levy. We traced the different stages of risk in relation to time. You could look at all of the key stages drawing across different literatures, but the main point is that now, under the conditions of global risk in a cosmopolitan world, we have to live with a new kind of unknowability. It's not the kind which existed before. It is pluralized, fragmented and to some extent individualized as well. In relation to understandings of time, there is no way of projecting. While modernity has historically been very much about managing the present and anticipating the future, this model breaks down.

GM: Yes, I think that is definitely true, but I think simultaneously institutions and people are still inured to traditional ways of operating and still seek to deploy the same modes and means of disciplining and controlling the future.

UB: Yet we have more knowledge about some risks than ever before. Climate change has been scientifically diagnosed. This is one case where we do have very robust knowledge. The same is true to some extent with radiation. It's not that we don't know anything. On the contrary, we know lots of things. We can predict what might occur if an accident

happens and what the consequences will be for future generations. So, there is a complicated relationship between the very detailed knowledge that we have and the denial that such events will ever transpire.

GM: How do you see this relationship being played out in everyday life across different continents? From the studies that you are involved in that are ongoing now, what are the key differences across space and place? Do you feel that you will ultimately be able to model what has happened and what is happening in other continents and contrast this with Western capitalist societies?

UB: First of all, I'll tell you about an eye-opening experience for me. I think it was in the early 1990s after *Risk Society* came out. There was a big conference on subjects such as this and during proceedings a colleague stood up and said: 'Well, *Risk Society* is beautifully written and very interesting, but I detect a strong scent of German security concerns in the book.' A few weeks later mad cow disease broke out in Britain! But, nevertheless, contextual backgrounds are important for what counts as a risk, for what people understand as a risk. For example, climate change doesn't have the same meaning internationally. In some countries they are more concerned with smaller but more nationally-grounded catastrophes. One example of this – which we shouldn't underestimate – is the food safety problem in China. This is a prescient case in terms of what we have been talking about as they are still trying to handle it in the conventional way and failing. This is such a big problem that many of the rich people are leaving China. Or they are creating their own farms so that they can produce safe food. So here you can see how even some smaller risks can create a level of distrust in institutions which is of high political importance.

GM: Yes, so much of this has remained uncovered. The issue of cultural difference is something that I certainly need to learn a lot more about. After visiting Japan it struck me that this is a country where the process of individualization is so different from, say, Germany or the UK. There is a strong emphasis on structures such as work and the family, but at the same time you can also see individualized hyper-freedoms, particularly amongst young people.

UB: From what I understand, if you are studying Japan you have to connect together the state, the family and the company in a specific way because lots of social security has traditionally been produced by the company and the family and not so much by the state. Yet globalization undermines the company and families are being disrupted by the necessity of working mobility and so on. So actually there is a new form of what I would call anomic individualization going on and there are many symptoms of this. Individualization is definitely not the same in Japan as

it is in the Western countries, especially Germany. This is related to some extent to emancipation because there is security of the state and to some extent a welfare system. But fear of failure is a big problem. If you don't have a job, or you don't have a good job, you can be seen as a failure to the family. This can lead to social isolation.

GM: Hence the *hikikomori*.

UB: Quite. One of the issues here, at least in my perception, is institutionalized individualization. They don't have institutionalized individualization. Instead, they have free markets and a paradoxical relationship between a state that wants to have control and at the same time loses control because of individualization which is necessary for the market economy to function. Did you know there is a discussion about individualization in the younger generations? I'm actually going to write a chapter about what I am calling 'generational metamorphosis'. This may be one of the most important chapters of the book. Young people are very much affected by metamorphosis. If you think about things from the point of view of global risk, things can look very pessimistic. We cannot do anything. But if you start thinking about global risk from the point of view of catastrophes being emancipatory, the world begins to look very different.

GM: One of the things I've tried to grapple with is applying the precautionary principle in relation to risk, particularly in terms of policies of pre-emption or precaution which may then produce negative effects. I don't know if you have any thoughts about this. Is it the case that we just have to look at each case of potential future harm and then respond differently according to what we know about it? How do we deal with the 'radical indeterminacy', in your words?

UB: I'm not too sure if I am ready to answer those questions! But my first reaction would be that the precautionary principle cannot be applied because there is no way back. We are living in a situation of global risk. We can't go back. With climate change we are beyond prevention and, of course, we have to look at how we handle this situation of uncertainty and not knowing and knowing all at the same time. As we said before, the precautionary principle doesn't provide us with an adequate answer to some future events which we have to take care of. If I was to retranslate or reinterpret the precautionary principle I would say that we need to reform the relations of definition. We need to think about how to overcome organized responsibility within institutions and also figure out who has to prove what and who is responsible to whom and who has to pay, and these questions have to be part of the thinking in science. How

can we still use causality, and the norms of causality, to cope with this? Who has to take responsibility?

When we talk about climate change and try to construct the risk – the global risk – then we are using maps of CO_2 exposure designed to align with national categories. But national categories amalgamate all kinds of data that incorporate very different levels of exposure which affect different actors and to some extent reproduce the problem of organized responsibility. It would be worthwhile conducting a mapping exercise, but a different one which is more related to the principal actors who are producing pollution and identifies specific industries. Constructing 'acceptable levels of exposure' is already part of redoubling organized responsibility and making it invisible. It's part of the politics of invisibility. This would be my argument. This would be one of the new political consequences which arise, in my view. The issue of visibility is critical in that it creates obligations and accountability and distribution of costs and so on. It's a very important issue. The amazing thing is that the climate scientists – many of whom who have quite sophisticated understandings of the problem actually – are still sticking to the principles of methodological nationalism.

GM: Yes, so the very techniques of risk assessment that they are using actually obfuscate the problem. They basically end up shrouding what they are supposed to be revealing. The undulations in terms of risk distribution get flattened.

UB: Exactly. So they are actually involved on the one hand in the politics of visibility, but on the other hand they are part of the politics of invisibility. This contradiction is illuminating. If you look at these things through the lens of metamorphosis, you see that the whole context within which the relations of definition are situated is very important for questions of how to cope with these kinds of global risk.

GM: So, returning to the metaphor of the double helix, would you say that people are actually able to recognize that the problem of climate change is different, more severe and more catastrophic, but they remain locked into the old methods and techniques? Would you say that most people have made half the journey, rather than the full journey?

UB: Exactly, this is what I would say, yes. The interesting political implication of this diagnosis would involve trying to demonstrate that there are different strategies and different starting points.

GM: I mean you could argue that some experts that have travelled some of the way – they have almost recognized the magnitude of the problems of world risk society – are still using the solutions of the first modernity.

These are maybe the ones, the very people actually, that need to be persuaded to take the next step. They need to also recognize the limits to their analysis, because in many respects their analysis simply follows on from what existed before. So, there would then be a temptation to say: 'okay, we know this now, isn't it great that we have worked it out', but actually they are still operating within restricted national limits and boundaries.

GM: It feels as though we have answered none of the questions we have raised!

UB: That's fine. I think it's opening up. It's all about adopting a different way of looking at things. We don't need to find all of the answers!

GM: No, no it's really nice. We have had a much more organic discussion than I had imagined.

UB: I have to say that this conversation has made me go through a lot of the issues in a new way. It is very encouraging, very motivating.

GM: Can I ask you, I've always wanted to ask you this: when you were writing *Risk Society* and you completed it, did you have any sense of just how big it was going to be?

UB: I have to say, from the outset, and when I finished writing it, yes. Because I concentrated all of my abilities on making this book possible. In the book I didn't tell the story of myself and my background in philosophy. I became a thinker through engagement with Fichte. That made me, that created the thinker in me. Therefore, I very much knew what I had done. It was not just by chance that I wrote this book. It was the same situation that I'm still feeling. I still feel that there are lots of sets of counter-evidence in the world out there which run against dominant perceptions and institutionalized ways of thinking and doing social sciences. I knew from my background that I had to write something which was convincing and that I had to do it in such a way as to create a new picture. I had travelled beyond philosophy. I felt that philosophy wasn't really able to solve the problems we are confronted with. On the one hand I was grappling with these big philosophical ideas. We had wonderful discussions in small groups. But on the other hand I recognized these discussions didn't relate to the problems I had in mind. So, I didn't want to go into universalistic theory construction. As I finished the book, I thought this is a big step. I had lots of conversations with people about the chapters of the book and they reacted differently.

After *Risk Society* was published there were two reactions. First of all, in the normal academic context in Bamberg at the time, I didn't feel

comfortable any more. To some extent, I thought that all of those normal people were looking at things in the normal way. So, I was a little bit reserved in terms of presenting my own ideas in the reality of conferences and these kinds of things. Second, there wasn't a big reaction to my ideas in the beginning. It took months to get a real reaction. For colleagues there was very little discussion. They felt that the book wasn't presented academically. They had problems relating to it, even after Chernobyl happened. So I thought the moment had somehow passed by. But then, I think it was at the beginning of January, *Der Spiegel* took it up. There was a really big essay about the book in *Der Spiegel*. Then things exploded! So, I was a little bit nervous in academia actually. I thought maybe I had done something wrong, something dirty perhaps!

GM: You were considered a *nestbeschmutzer?*

UB: Well, I didn't know that the book would have such an effect. But I did expect something to happen. It took quite a while to be translated into English and again this was a disappointment. It took six years, lots of time. I thought that things were lost. You know that Tony (Giddens) picked up the argument very early on, but he didn't push the translation. Scott Lash did. I met him when he was in Germany. We met and he asked Sage if they would want to translate it into English and it happened. But it took six years, so you do actually think after a year, two years or three years, maybe it's not going to happen.

GM: Well, I suppose what did happen in the UK during that time just added to the resonance of your argument in terms of the BSE crisis and so on. There were huge debates, conflicts, questions of trust, so in a sense maybe nothing was lost by the delay.

UB: No.

GM: The book became more, not less relevant.

UB: Yes. It did. Okay. I think it is time to go!

Note

This discussion above took place in Munich in August 2014. The author would like to thank Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim for her kind permission in agreeing to make this interview public. Thanks are also due to Albert Gröber for his assistance and valuable comments in preparing the final version.

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